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PHONICS OR NO PHONICS?¹

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Many are doubtless endeavoring to decide as to the most efficient method of teaching primary reading, whether through phonetic drills or otherwise.

To those who are interested in determining the value of phonics as related to primary reading, this test may prove helpful.

The experiment was carried on in the first and second grades. In each grade two classes of equal size and equal average ability were formed, and in each one division was given through phonetic drills. All words were developed phonetically. The other classes had no knowledge whatever of phonics. Words were developed by quick-perception and sense-content methods.

During the year the following observations were made in both grades.

The phonic classes so concentrated upon letter sounds that the attention was diverted from the sense of the paragraph to word pronunciation. This brought about lack of interest and fatigue and destroyed the pleasure which the story should yield. The reading was generally less smooth, slower, and the idea confused.

The classes having no phonics were found to enjoy reading for the sake of the study. From the story they got the sense-content. They were less careful and less correct than the phonic classes in regard to word pronunciation. Keeping the sense in mind, they often substituted words from their own vocabulary for difficult or unfamiliar words in the text. They read more swiftly and with more expression. Fatigue was reduced, because curiosity in the story held the interest and caused the attention to be focused upon the outcome of the story.

¹ The report of an experiment carried on under the supervision of Superintendent Charles A. Breck, of Rochester, New Hampshire.

From time to time stories with which the children were unfamiliar were assigned for them to read silently, entirely unassisted. At a signal, books were closed and the pupils were asked to reproduce what they had read. Many of the children of the phonic classes, although very accurate in word pronunciation, were almost helpless when this reproduction was required. Those in the non-phonic classes were, in most cases, able to give clear ideas of the contents.

As a final test in June, the superintendent gave to all classes books which they had never before seen, and stories were chosen which were also new.

No words were developed in preparation for any class. The ability of the classes in attacking new words was found to be about the same, although the class having no phonics read more rapidly, more expressively, but less accurately.

In special cases these observations were made, which have proved valuable: Foreign children, those having impediments of speech, and those who had previously formed bad habits of pronunciation were greatly benefited through the phonetic drills. Certain hesitant, expressionless, and habitually slow readers were greatly helped in overcoming these faults by the rapid work required in the quick-perception and sense-content methods.